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Soviet Testing of Carter's Mettle

The wary, wily old men in the Kremlin apparently have been testing President Carter's mettle for the past 18 months and have concluded that he can be pushed around.

This is the impression of strategists with access to the National Security Council's secret studies of Soviet-American relations.

As part of Carter's pre-inaugural briefings, he was warned that the Soviets would try to take his measure by testing his reactions. This advice was either discerned or anticipated by Soviet President Leonid I. Brezhnev, who sent word to the president-elect that the Kremlin had no intention of testing or embarrassing him.

Yet Carter had scarcely settled into the White House before the testing began. He was led to expect an early summit meeting with Brezhnev, complete with agreements that would advance detente. But Carter was continually put off; the Kremlin tried to use his desire for a summit meeting as a negotiating point, seeking concessions in return.

Just as a chill was settling in, the climate in the Kremlin suddenly warmed up again. Carter and Brezhnev began exchanging private letters. The prospects for a summit meeting between the two adversaries were revived by the end of 1977.

The president reported to his Cabinet on Nov. 21, 1977, according to the confidential minutes, that he was "attempting to cooperate with the Soviets on a number of fronts." He had appealed to Brezhnev, for instance, to use moderation in commenting upon Middle Eastern developments. Carter told the Cabinet that the appeal had "some effect."

The following January, a White House staff member watched Soviet military maneuvers near Minsk. Carter boasted to the Cabinet that it was "the first time such a visit by an American official has been permitted."

But then the Kremlin leaders arranged their most severe test. They made a bold move on the African chessboard to gain a foothold in Ethiopia, which had sought Soviet help to oust Somali invaders from the Ogaden desert.

The Soviets quietly withdrew military stores, set aside for possible use against China, from their arsenals behind the Ural Mountains. A fleet of cargo vessels and jumbo transport planes began hauling artillery, jet fighters, machine guns, tanks and other lethal hardware to Ethiopia. Cuban troops were flown in to bolster the Ethiopian army.

Last Feb. 7, the president reported to the Cabinet that the Soviet-American relationship was "not as good as it should be." His national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, briefed the Cabinet on what he called "a pattern of deterioration."

Carter responded by toughening his public statements and warning against Soviet imperialism in Africa. He also sent private notice to the Kremlin that no more presidential messages would be delivered through Dobrynin.

Abruptly, Brezhnev changed moods again and became his former amiable self. He encouraged the president to believe that a strategic arms limitation settlement was within reach.

On March 6, Carter told the Cabinet that he would not link an arms settlement "to the Soviet presence in the African Horn." He reported happily that "progress was being made" in the negotiations and that he expected to resolve "the last three or four issues" personally with Brezhnev.

The Kremlin's moves in Africa, meanwhile, impressed African countries with Soviet power and decisiveness. The United States, in contrast, appeared to be weak and reluctant, bandying words instead of weapons. There is reason to believe that the Kremlin leaders also came to regard Carter as weak and conciliatory.

They began to set him up for a humiliating slap in the face. He had made a personal, private appeal to the Soviets to release the celebrated Jewish dissident Anatoly Scharansky.

So the Kremlin ignored Carter's appeal and went ahead with the trial. Scharansky was accused of spying for the United States, and the court was rigged to find him guilty of "treason."

The president checked with CIA chief Stansfield Turner and satisfied himself that Scharansky had never been connected, directly or indirectly, with the CIA. So Carter went public with a statement that Scharansky had never been an American spy.

Unimpressed, the Soviets found Scharansky guilty anyway, thereby proclaiming the president a liar. This was a personal affront to Carter, who petulantly cut off computer shipments to the Soviet Union. His response must have caused quiet mirth inside the Kremlin; it helps to explain why the Soviet rulers apparently have concluded that Carter can be pushed around.